RouterCentric

Zebrano box

The Editor gets crafty with some striking timber to create this unusual slide-top box

We tend to think of timber as anything from dull to beautiful but there are a few that defy either description, like zebrano *(Microberlinia brazzavillensis)* with its mad striping. So here, in an 'homage de Kevin Ley', I'd like to share with you this unusual looking slide-topped box. Thicknessing was done by degrees because the opposing grain would otherwise tear out very easily.

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1 It seemed to me there was little point in using such a lively grained timber if I tried to tame it. So I cut all components at an angle to create an even more eye-straining result when it was finally assembled! This was going to create waste pieces, which I hung on to for later.

2 The two strips intended for the box sides and ends with their diagonal striping. They are over-length and are fully machined before cutting into their constituent parts.

3 First of the grooves for the bottom panel. This was done with a 6mm groover and breakthrough fence. The first pass was a very light, scoring cut because the angled grain threatened to 'rag' along the edges of the grooves. After that, the zebrano behaved itself with subsequent passes.

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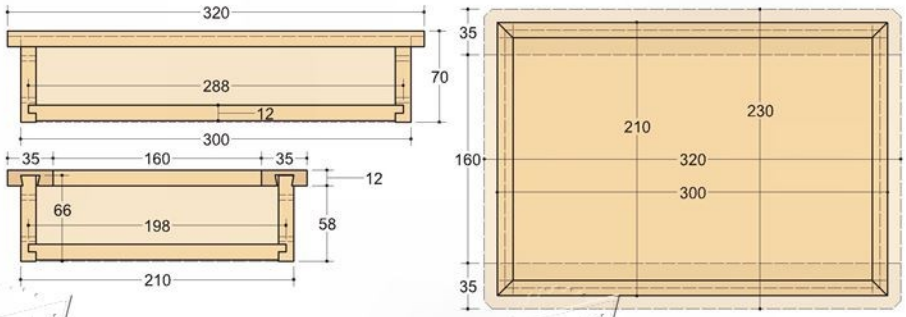
PHOTOGRAPHS BY GMC/ANTHONY BAILEY



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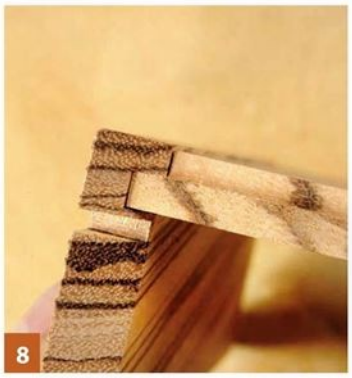
4 Just to be different, I wanted the lid to slide over, rather than between the sides of the box. So I used a dovetail cutter to machine the outside top edges. At the very start I had marked all components so I knew which side was which.

5 The sides and ends are cut to length accurately and the ends bevelled at 45° using a push block on the router table. Be careful not to trim the lengths of the components – they need to stay exactly the same.

6 I decided to use 'keys' to hold the corners together, but instead of the usual veneer slips I opted for little blocks cut from some pieces of cocobolo *(Dalbergia retusa)*. The slots cut with a narrow groover were again done with the push block perpendicular to the fence so they would be quite small slots compared to longer sawn kerfs.

7 The ends need to have the dovetail section sawn off and the edges planed down slightly so the lid can slide over them. The inside faces need to be sanded to a finish.

8 The base blank is sanded and then cut accurately to fit the grooves when the box is assembled. This can be done as a push-together dry assembly and measurements taken. A tongue is formed so the base fits into the grooves tightly; the bottom must not finish lower than the box sides and ends.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9 The keys are sawn as strips from a contrast hardwood and then sanded to final thickness. The fit in the box slots must be tight as quite a lot depends on the strength they confer on the plain mitre joints.

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10 Keep checking the fit as you sand so the keys are a really good fit without spreading the slots and causing damage.

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11 The mitres have PVA glue spread across the faces and dribbled into the slots. They are then pressed together and the keys cut as square blocks and tapped home, but square to the box so they fill the slots completely. During this operation the base needs to be inserted too.

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12 Make sure the joints are tight and fit evenly. The critical dimension is the width across the single-sided dovetails; this needs to be the same at both ends so the lid can slide freely.

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13 At the same time the box should be square. Check and re-check the squareness and the parallelism of the dovetails. When you are sure all is good and the joints are still tight, damp wipe the glue off and leave the box to set.

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14 Once dry, the key blocks can be sawn off flush. The outside sanding can be left until later once the lid is finished.

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15 The vulnerable upstanding mitre end of each box side can now be cut into a shallow point and the tip of this also nipped off to improve the look of them and reduce potential damage in use.

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16 I had quite a large board of zebrano but it seemed to disappear quite quickly when sawn up. So I decided to use all the offcuts to create a zigzag lid, which would

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then match the overall style of the piece. The marks ensure you have the right pieces in the right place for assembly.

17 I shot the edges with my No.6 fore plane until they all fitted together nicely without any gapping. It was important to respect the grain direction here, as zebrano tears very easily.

18 A simple glue-up left overnight, to create an oversize panel ready for trimming.

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19 The board was cut square and slightly oversize. The fore plane was again used to trim all edges to give the correct amount of box overhang. The ends were done first in case there was any breakout, which happily wasn't the case.

20 A belt sander with 120 grit going cross-grain levelled the pieces without leaving drastic scratching, with any remainder to be random orbital sanded later.

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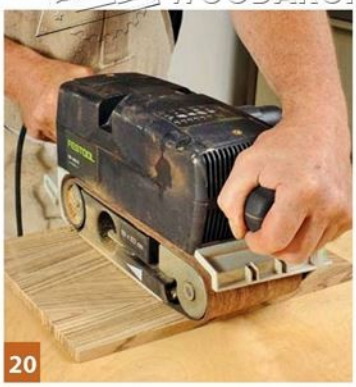
The lid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21 I cut a piece of MDF to the same size as the top, fitted a dovetail cutter in the router table and did trial cuts to determine where the two slots needed to be. This is critical to avoid too tight a fit or a loose one, where the lid would just fall off. I used a second piece of MDF for a final corrected fit and felt reasonably confident about machining the zebrano.

22 The second piece of MDF sliding nicely on the zebrano box. Everything seemed good, nearly there…

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23 Disaster! You may notice two strips of walnut *(Juglans regia)* have now appeared with the dovetail slots in them. What happened? A 'rising cutter', that's what. It can happen to anyone and this was my solution when the zebrano ran out. Read 'Workshop Notes' on p.73 for more on rising cutters. Nevertheless, the result was probably better in the end for this, for once hardwax oiled the box looks fantastic thanks to such a vibrant timber as zebrano tempered with the walnut strips. ■